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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 000426

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: AN ARMY COLONEL ON DEMOCRACY AND THE MILITARY

REF: LAGOS 212

Classified by Ambassador Howard F. Jeter; Reasons 1.6X6.

1. (C) SUMMARY: In an unusually frank discussion, Nigerian Colonel and ECOWAS staff member M. Dixon Dikio (please strictly protect) told PolMilOff that a major breakdown of command led to reprisal attacks in Benue, and those attacks were unjustifiable. In his view, LTG Malu's response to the Benue situation served to highlight Malu's lack of intellectual honesty, and furthermore, justified Malu's removal as Chief of Army Staff. Touting both Operation Focus Relief and ACRI, the Colonel said more of both were needed, in Nigeria and throughout West Africa. Later, responding to the explosions at the Ikeja cantonment, and reflecting on the Benue events, he viscerally lamented a lack of accountability in the Nigerian military. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) The Colonel spoke very highly of Operation Focus Relief, and said his colleagues in the Nigerian Army were impressed and wanted more. He spoke positively about the benefits of ACRI (he had witnessed ACRI training), and had been quietly trying to convince his military colleagues to rethink Nigeria's past opposition to ACRI. In his estimation, creating inter-operability between West African militaries would be the key to stability in the sub-region under the umbrella of ECOWAS. Both ACRI and Operation Focus Relief would support this goal if provided systematically. Moreover, these programs could be conduits for needed reforms in regional militaries, he believed.

3. (C) The Colonel was visibly disgusted when asked about violence in Benue last October. Turning first to LTG Samuel Victor Malu (former Chief of Army Staff), he said, "If I had any respect left for Malu before Benue, it is gone now." He opined that President Obasanjo had erred when he selected Malu as Chief of Army Staff. Obasanjo should have reached deeper into the Army to avoid "corrupted" officers. Malu had led the attacks that resulted in the destruction of Odi in 1999, which the Colonel described as a "slaughter." Then Malu, as Chief of Army Staff, had publicly spoken out against government policies. "Malu should have been removed earlier," he said, "but when he began publicly criticizing government policy, that was it."

4. (C) After Benue, the Colonel stated, Malu did not have the intellectual honesty to admit the similarity with Odi. PolMilOff referred to a magazine article where, in the same breath, Malu had said that Nigeria had nothing to learn from the U.S. on peacekeeping (OFR) and that the Nigerian Army had no ability for peacekeeping (Benue). The Colonel replied, "Exactly - intellectual dishonesty."

5. (C) PolMilOff noted that it appeared an order was given to dispatch troops to Benue after the death of the 19 soldiers, and that order had come from the Presidency, but it remained undetermined whether a high-level order had been given to raze villages and engage in reprisal attacks. The Colonel stated there was a clear breakdown of command, which was unacceptable. Chief of Army Staff, LTG Ogomudia was responsible, whether he had given orders or not, and what had happened was unjustifiable in a democracy. The Colonel agreed that lack of civilian policing capacity led to the Army's insertion in Benue, as in Odi. However, until the police could handle violent civil disturbances, the Army would continue to be called upon and more tragic incidents could result (unless the army received sufficient training in controlling civil disturbances), he reflected.

6. (C) The Colonel opined that the events in Benue, like those in Odi, exacerbated the civil-military gap in Nigerian society. They also indicated just how far command and control had broken down. Describing the Nigerian Army as a leper, he said, "Everyone knows it is there and is a human being, but no one wants to touch it." While there is widespread sulking in the military, and the GON is performing

badly on many fronts, he surmised that the Army, like a seriously ill patient, was in no position to cause trouble.

17. (C) The Colonel argued that the creation of state police forces in Nigeria could help manage insecurity. State police forces would allow for better, more localized response to crises. Countering the common argument that state forces would become political tools in local politics, he reasoned that the Inspector General of Police, who reports to the President, and was far from immune to political pressure. Moreover, he explained, state police commissioners had de facto veto power over governors who were elected by the people: They could choose to ignore Governors' orders simply by saying that they were waiting for instructions from Abuja. Simply put, the commissioners of police in each state were already influenced by political considerations. Furthermore, while fear of state police forces being unduly influenced was a justifiable concern, that problem could be minimized through better training and proper management.

18. (C) PolMilOff met the Colonel on a second occasion, after the disaster at the Ikeja military cantonment. Visibly distraught over the catastrophe, he stated that the cantonment had been intended to receive and redistribute ordnance unused after deployments such as those to Liberia and Sierra Leone. However, because "nothing works in the Army anymore," ordnance had never been redistributed as planned. The disaster happened, like events in Benue, he stated, because there was no accountability in the Nigerian military. Someone must be held accountable, he said.

19. (C) COMMENT: Nothing the Colonel said was a revelation. However, it is extremely uncommon for a Nigerian Army officer to talk to a diplomat from a Western Embassy so candidly and critically about his service and its behavior, and his comments offer some insight into the mood of mid-level Nigerian officers. Ironically, while strongly criticizing LTG Malu, he echoed Malu's comments to the Ambassador regarding the Army's inability to threaten Nigeria's nascent democracy (reftel).
Jeter